

EXCERPTS FROM THE MEMOIRS OF TOMASCHEK

by D.M.King

Johann Wenzel Tomaschek (born April 17, 1774, died April 3, 1850) was an important, if little known, figure in the history of Romantic music. A musician of considerable intellectual attainments - especially devoted to the music of antiquity -, Tomaschek observed the world around him and kept a diary called 'Erinnerungen', which was published in six installments in the Prague periodical 'Libussa' from 1845 to 1850; the following excerpts are taken from this autobiography. These observations and opinions are of value because they reflect the views of an eminent musician who was personally acquainted with Mozart, Haydn, Beethoven, Abbe Vogler, Spohr, Weber, Hummel, and many others of importance.

Prague, 1808

Spohr came to Prague in the autumn and, with his wife, gave a very well-attended concert. There is not, and never has been, an artist who is as sincere and conscientious in his art as Spohr. He is on equally as high a plane as composer and as virtuoso. His personal leaning towards the elegaic may be the reason why his compositions bear so unmistakably the stamp of their creator. At the concert he revealed, along with an extremely clean intonation, a tone that was at once virilely strong and yet soft; at the same time, he showed that he could toss off passages of thirds, sixths, octaves, and tenths in rapid tempo and with the greatest precision, and all the while with a noble and unforced bowing - in short, he showed that he was truly the master of his instrument. On such grounds, it is no wonder that the world considered him the foremost virtuoso and his well-organized and tasteful concert-pieces the best and purest compositions. His wife made a very agreeable appearance as virtuoso on the pedal-harp. For the most part, she played compositions of her husband; she performed everything with the cleanest precision, although without that poetic rapture which cannot be learned but is a natural gift.

Vienna, Concert at the Kärntnertor Theater on November 14, 1814

... Now Moscheles sat down at the piano and played a fantasy; at least that is what the programme called it. I could not, however, see any trace of a fantasy in his clean and brilliant playing; for a short, insignificant Adagio introduction, followed by a few variations on a theme from the opera 'Fidelio', the entire finger-exercise closing with the finale from 'Fidelio', cannot, after all, be considered a fantasy in the sense that the spontaneous inspiration of the composer creates it. The virtuoso enjoyed warm applause, particularly from female hands. ... At the end came the 'Klage bei Haydns Tod', a cantata by Cherubini. This alone had really prompted me to attend the concert; yet how cheated I felt when, aside from Cherubini's mannerisms, I could find in the work nothing of his spirit, which alone would have compensated me for the time and travel. The cantata began with an introduction; very mournfully performed, it was fully twice as long as the ensuing recitative with the well-developed trio. That here too, as in all his works, there was no dearth of scattered instrumental trifles was indicated above in the word mannerism. The work not only made no effect, but wearied the audience so much that, not even waiting for the end, they gradually stole away; I, however, left only after the last chord had sounded.

Vienna, November 16, 1814. Quartets at Spohr's house

The room was well filled with listeners, among them Moscheles, Pechatschek, Baron Kruft, the opera-singer Schebele, and my pupil, Worzischek. Spohr seemed in bad temper that day, apparently because of his impending removal from the post of Kapellmeister at the Theater an der Wien. I was told that Spohr had behaved brusquely towards some opera-singers who therefore refused to sing under his direction. Count P. was thereupon compelled to let Spohr go. Who, however, does not know all the absurd demands that are often made by opera-singers upon the art and upon its priests?

Prague, 1816

In Advent, Hummel came to Prague to give a concert. At that time the crop of virtuosi was not as luxuriant as it is nowadays, when everyone tours Europe with a couple of the so-called fantasies of Thalberg or memorised etudes of Chopin not for the purpose of glorifying the art, but solely to attract notices which, via hireling newspapers, may be used to advertise the newcomer as something extraordinary in every locale that has not yet been visited by him. The piano has now become a coffin wherein true musicianship shall sleep until a musical Spring wakes it from its slumbers, once again to admit mankind into the lost musical paradise. I beg pardon for this bitter episode, but I believe that this (phenomenon) is responsible for the disappearance of almost every trace of the wonderful tradition of Gluck, Mozart and Haydn.

Hummel's touch was more feminine than virile, and reminded me for the most part of Wölfel's playing. When I recall that both men, competent artists, were Mozart's pupils, I am tempted to conclude that the master also did not possess a vigorous touch. Such a conclusion, however, would stand in direct contradiction to his compositions, which sound quite full-bodied. - Otherwise Hummel played very nicely, never losing strict tempo, a virtue that is not much practiced in these times. Hummel's compositions adhered to Mozartean forms; if I had anything to criticize in his work, it was the excessive length with which his larger compositions are burdened. ...

Concerning Tomaschek's performance of his own setting of Goethe's 'Mignons Sehnsucht' in the presence of the author, 1822

The few words, "You have understood the poem", which Goethe said to me after hearing the last-named showed me clearly that he was fully satisfied with my setting of this poem, especially since he went on to say, "I cannot comprehend how Beethoven and Spohr could so completely misunderstand the song as to through-compose it; the distinctive mark that stands at the same place in each strophe would be enough, I should think, to indicate to the composer that all I wanted from him was a Lied. Mignon, by her very nature, can sing a Lied, but not an aria."

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